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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD  
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

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| Landmark/District: | <b>Mount Pleasant Historic District</b>        | (x) Agenda            |
| Address:           | <b>3428, 3430 and 3432 Oakwood Terrace, NW</b> |                       |
| Meeting Date:      | <b>May 23, 2013</b>                            | (x) New construction  |
| Case Number:       | <b>13-335 (11-071)</b>                         |                       |
| Staff Reviewer:    | <b>Tim Dennée</b>                              | (x) Concept (renewal) |

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The applicant, owner and architect Carmel Greer (District Design LLC), requests the Board's renewal of a December 2012 conceptual approval of a proposal to construct rowhouses on the vacant lot at the intersection of Oakwood Terrace and 17<sup>th</sup> Street. The December 2012 staff report is attached. The Board unanimously approved "the conceptual site plan, height and massing of the three rowhouses<sup>1</sup> and retaining wall, with suggestions for minor revisions as the plan is further developed."

The proposed subdivision of the property into three lots of record has been already carried out, in accordance with the previous approval, but the permit application and working drawings have not yet been submitted for the construction itself.

With regard to renewals of approvals, the historic preservation regulations state that:

The Board's recommendations on an application, including an application for conceptual design review and preliminary review, remains in effect for a period of two years from the date of the Board's action granting conceptual approval. Upon expiration of this period, the applicant may return to the Board with a request for an extension of one additional period of two years for good cause shown. The Board is not required to reopen the review of the application, and shall not unreasonably withhold its approval of an extension. Upon expiration of the extension, or if the extension is denied, a new application shall be required for any further review of the project by the Board.

In the present case, the applicant has recently secured financing for the project, which seems sufficient cause, and is ready to prepare construction documents. The Board has received a request to reopen review of the application, however, as there is some opposition to the project in the neighborhood. Reopening review is appropriate in any case; while the plan, height and massing remain as approved, the applicant has revised the details, and the Board may evaluate to

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<sup>1</sup> Technically, it is three lots and three houses, but the central lot and building would contain two units, permitted as "flats" in the R-4 zone and expressed as two rowhouses.

what extent the project may have incorporated or improved upon revisions suggested at the time of review. A copy of the 2010 set of drawings has been appended to the new set.

## **Evaluation**

The applicant has agreed to construct the 17<sup>th</sup> Street site wall to match the materials and appearance of the granite retaining walls found along many of the Mount Pleasant streets, which is almost certainly the most compatible approach. The automobile gates within the wall remain to be developed, as are protections for the mature tree next to the gateway. The applicant is still considering providing a narrow, publicly accessible sidewalk along 17<sup>th</sup>.

Revisions have better unified the building(s), making them read more like related units, and the façade of the center units no longer resemble stair towers. The horizontal wood elements have been removed from the southernmost and northernmost units. Most of the French doors have been removed from the facade, and the fenestration shows more pattern. The cornice detail is more elaborated than on the previous submission. Two belt courses have been introduced between the floors, and although the lower one may be effective in delineating a base, the upper one cuts the body of the building too much horizontally; the panels at the parapet are sufficient to suggest a proportional top to the building. It is not clear if the vertical lines indicating breaks between units will be perceptible in the real world, i.e., whether there will be a reveal or even a cold joint. But that is of little importance, as such breaks were never necessary to demarcate individual rowhouses.

Additional detail has been added in the form of brick panels at the parapet, evocative of similar details from modest, mid- to late-1920s rowhouses. There are also panels at the base of first-floor window openings, something that is probably unnecessary, and inadvisable for maintenance reasons. The HVAC equipment is not shown, but to the extent that it appears on the roof, it should be centered as much as possible, so it can be screened behind the parapet. The applicant has opted not to add canopies over the main entrances, something that was suggested by the staff as a way to establish a rhythm analogous to porches, but in a more confined space. The lack of canopies makes the building cleaner, as such elements can be visually unsuccessful, but they had been suggested out of experience with homeowners wanting to retrofit their entrances with them. As an alternative, the applicant proposes to set the doors well back into their openings to provide some cover.

As yet, there are no elevation drawings of the narrow north and south ends of the building.

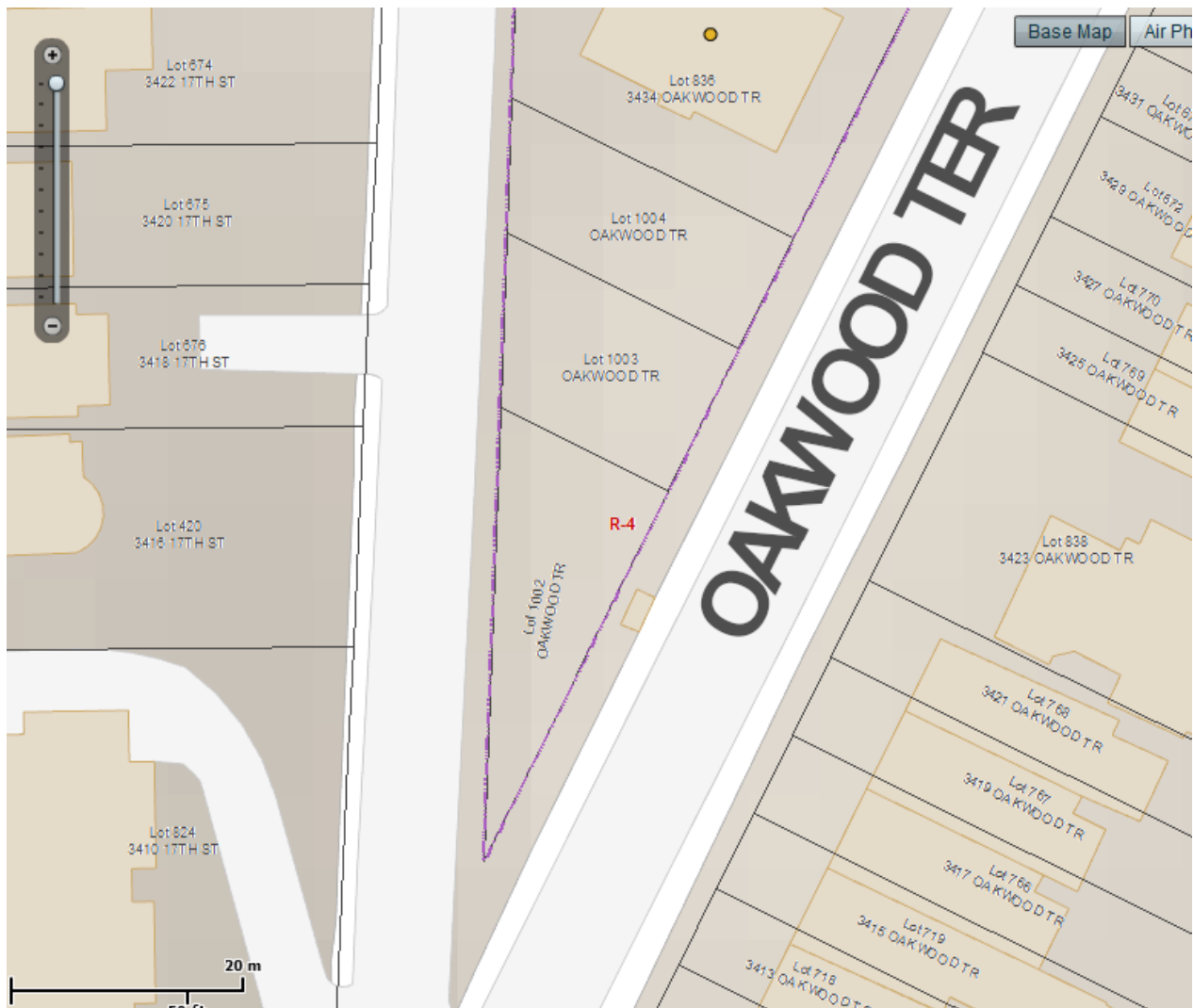
With respect to new construction within historic districts, the purpose of the preservation law is to “assure that new construction and subdivision of lots in an historic district are compatible with the character of the historic district.” To that end, the Mayor or Mayor’s Agent, with the recommendation of the Board when necessary, must deny an application only if the project is found to be incompatible with the character of the historic district:

The permit shall be issued unless the Mayor, after due consideration of the zoning laws and regulations of the District of Columbia, finds that the design of the building and the character of the historic district or historic landmark are

incompatible; provided, that in any case in which an application is made for the construction of an additional building or structure on a lot where there is presently a building or structure, the Mayor may deny a construction permit entirely where he finds that any additional construction will be incompatible with the character of the historic district or historic landmark.

### **Recommendation**

*The HPO recommends that the Board reaffirm its earlier finding and renew the conceptual approval of the proposed plan, height, massing of the new construction, including the 17<sup>th</sup> Street wall, with a delegation of permit review to staff, but with the applicant to incorporate recommendations the Board may make as to finer revisions.*



*The property today, as subdivided into three lots.*

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|--------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Landmark/District: | <b>Mount Pleasant Historic District</b>  | ( <b>x</b> ) Agenda           |
| Address:           | <b>17<sup>th</sup> Street and Oakwood Terrace, NW<br/>Square 2621, Lot 798</b> | ( ) Consent                   |
| Meeting Date:      | <b>December 16, 2010</b>   | ( <b>x</b> ) New construction |
| Case Number:       | <b>11-071</b>  | ( ) Addition                  |
|                    |  | ( ) Alterations               |
| Staff Reviewer:    | <b>Tim Dennée</b>  | ( <b>x</b> ) Concept          |

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The applicant, owner and architect Carmel Greer, requests the Board's conceptual review of a proposal to subdivide the vacant lot at the intersection of Oakwood Terrace and 17<sup>th</sup> Street and construct rowhouses.

**Subdivision and site plan**

The property drops steeply to the west, toward 17<sup>th</sup> Street and the Rock Creek valley. The topography explains why this is perhaps the last unbuilt parcel in Mount Pleasant. The triangular lot would be divided into three, with the common property lines perpendicular to Oakwood Terrace. The houses would thus face Oakwood and, not as deep as the lots themselves, they would allow room for some parking on the 17<sup>th</sup> Street side and terraces or partial yards. The front yards would be very shallow, with only a few feet between sidewalk and building facades. This is necessitated by the limited depths of the lot, but also by the fact that pushing the buildings westward down the slope while maintaining the entrances at the Oakwood grade would require more extensive foundations.

The center lot would accommodate two attached units, as the R-4 zoning permits two-family "flats." The length of the southernmost house, squeezed by its narrow lot, would run perpendicular to the other houses, giving it a distinctive massing.

For reasons of retaining the site grade and enclosing the parking, there would be a very tall masonry wall on the 17<sup>th</sup> Street side of the site. The owner also proposes to construct a public sidewalk along 17<sup>th</sup> Street outside this wall. It would necessarily be quite narrow and steep.

**Design**

The three-story buildings would stand 35 feet tall from the Oakwood grade. The principal exterior material would be brick. The overall design vocabulary is contemporary, with large openings, planar surfaces, and lack of ornament. There is a notion of incorporating some narrow-exposure wood siding for texture.



*Left: A GIS map detail showing the triangular subject property at center.*

*Right: The same view with the lot layer removed, showing the topographic contours (two-foot intervals)*

The design incorporates punched window openings with (presumably metal) casements and ground-floor French doors. The applicant has presented two options for the facades of the center units, one with double French doors and punched window openings, and another with glazing in a more random pattern comprising most of the surface.

## **Evaluation**

The spare, contemporary vocabulary of the proposed construction is sufficiently compatible with the character of the historic district and its predominant building type, a variety of rowhouses erected from the turn of the twentieth century to the mid twentieth century.

A development of this nature—on a challenging, hilly site, previously undeveloped—is bound to raise some concerns about visual effects on neighboring properties. One consideration is, of course, the prospect of the buildings looming over 17<sup>th</sup> Street. An examination of the context, however, shows that the houses on the west side of 17<sup>th</sup> directly opposite the subject property are elevated at a comparable height, considerably set back, and have their own, lower, off-street parking areas. If the new homes were instead proposed to be sunk to a height of three stories above the 17<sup>th</sup> Street grade, then two stories or less of the rear of the buildings would face higher existing buildings on Oakwood, and the lower floors of each would have no light from that direction. As planned, the new houses would relate well to the height of the Oakwood homes, which have a partial attic and stand on a high base because of the topography.

The applicant has accounted for the drop of 17<sup>th</sup> Street by introducing a setback of the rear of the northernmost rowhouse (providing an exterior terrace), so that it manages to step down partially while retaining a height on Oakwood consistent with the others. The openings for the rear doors and transoms are also taller to straddle the main and basement levels.

The property most affected by the project is the house immediately north of the site, because it faces south. Owned by the applicant, this 1932 home was oriented perpendicular to the street,

with a modest pedimented entrance facing a small yard and the treed slope. A few conditions mitigate this adjacency. First, there is twenty-foot distance between the existing and proposed construction, and this is the extent of the roughly level ground in front of the former. In addition, the vegetation and inaccessibility of the lot to the south of the house has already rendered the front yard a virtual side yard as seen from outside the property.

Several tweaks of the facades are recommended. First, the option with the smaller punched openings on the central units is much preferable to the option with the more extensive glazing. The latter, while incorporating some smaller-scaled elements, introduces a grander scale than is found elsewhere in these houses or in Mount Pleasant generally. In addition, the larger expanses of glazing, distinct from the other openings, are suggestive of stair towers and make the smaller units appear as the circulation cores of flanking multi-unit buildings. They defeat efforts to establish a rhythm of similar rowhouses, like the general pattern of the neighborhood.

It would probably be better, and more compatible, to reduce the number of doors on the fronts of the homes. The multiple French doors add confusion as to which would be the normal entry. More typical of rear elevations, but not completely unheard-of feature of a rowhouse façade, historic examples of multiple doors usually have more significant mediating spaces or structures—such as porches—between the public space and the home’s interior. The proximity of so much glass to the public way suggests that occupants would retrofit the openings with screening for privacy and security. The prospect of doors across the face of the majority of the buildings indicates a likelihood that there would be little, if any, green space maintained in front of them.

It may be useful to anticipate future residents’ likely interest in having an overhang at the entrance. The Historic Preservation Office often receives applications to retrofit similar entrances with coverings. Especially if there are to be multiple doors, a canopy could serve a second function signalling the actual entrance. Although there is insufficient space for a true porch, as most Mount Pleasant rowhouses have, repeating canopies on at least the northern three units would be analogous to porches and reinforce the relationship among the buildings, much as at the modern rowhouses on the north side of Harvard Street.

The proposed retaining wall would be most compatible if it were faced with the irregular granite used for such walls in public space during the early twentieth century. The most similar instance to the proposed are the very high walls on Adams Mill Road. The wall would probably be better if even a bit taller where it meets the rear yards of the northern and southern units, so that it becomes a parapet enclosing the yard and replaces much of the rail. This would better integrate the terrace into the topography; the rail perched prominently atop of the wall associates the wall more with the architecture of the house than with the topography.

Details of the masonry of the retaining wall and the homes, and the nature of the possible siding, require further exploration.

### **Recommendation**

The staff recommends that the Board approve the concept, including the overall site plan, height and massing of the homes and retaining wall, with some revision as suggested above.